

Narrative Time

Like life, stories and novels take place in time and can be structured in many different ways. Here are some common ones:

Chronological timeline (A-Z)

Appropriate for adventure stories and stories driven by the action. This kind of novel needs to start in the action, unless you can draw the reader in with humour or a luscious prose style. Failing this, you cannot afford a slow build up unless you establish a hook by foreshadowing to the reader what may happen in the future. A kind of 'If I had known then what I know now, I would never have....' device. (See 'The Icarus Girl' by Helen Oyeyemi.)

Advantages: Provided you have a good plot, this is the easiest timeline to deal with because everything happens in the right order.

Disadvantages: Linear narratives can become monotonous, or as Hemingway described them, 'One damn thing after another'.

Staying entirely in chronological narrative makes for a thinner story lacking in texture as it cuts out the ability to throw light on present events by showing their causes in the past. This can be got around by using summary or flashback to present previous events where these are relevant to the present plot.

Linear narratives can also lack psychological depth as, in real life, past, present and future all exist in the mind at the same time; only the enlightened live entirely in the present. But this psychological layering can be dealt with in a chronological narrative by using internal flashbacks (memories) and imagined consequences or projections into the future ('If I had known then...')

Another useful technique to add pace and vary the linear structure is to jump cut (to use film terminology), i.e. to jump forward into the next action to avoid mundane passages where characters are just being moved from place to place or one situation to another. By doing this you can throw us forward into an interesting moment and establish a minor mystery - for example, *Why has Rita just chucked a glass of wine over her boss?* Then you can briefly summarise what happened before (see [Scene and Summary](#) for more examples).

Suspense can also be created by setting up a moment of tension - *your protagonist is trapped in the house with a savage dog* - and keeping the reader waiting for the outcome by cutting to something else - *a dramatised flashback of a similar emotion he experienced in the past when the school bully trapped him in the playground*. Or you could cut to another character and what they are doing, e.g. *his girlfriend waiting impatiently for him outside the opening of her first art exhibition*.

Total Flashback

This is a relatively well known convention, especially in films. It is useful for stories in which there is some past mystery or tragedy that the protagonist is working through in order to come to terms with their past.

The story starts with a Prologue in which the character makes some reference to something dramatic that happened in the past (the 'hook'). Then the narrative goes back to the beginning of the past story and continues until it comes back to the point when the Prologue is set. At this point, the story ends. In this type of timeline, the promise that must be fulfilled is that the past story will solve the mystery set up in the Prologue, and create a satisfactory resolution. Successful examples of this structure are 'Rebecca' by Daphne du Maurier, and 'The Secret History' by Donna Tartt.

Advantages: Allows the opportunity to create a strong hook for the reader prior to the chronological narrative, which may not be so compelling, but the knowledge that some mystery is going to be revealed will keep the reader reading. Most of the narrative, after the opening, remains chronological.

Disadvantages: The relevance of the past narrative to the problem or mystery established in the opening must be quickly evident. There may be a long gap between the setting up of the 'now' narrative and its conclusion, so the opening hook will have to be powerful enough to carry the reader through until the drama picks up in the past narrative. In a short story one mystery may be enough – in a novel you may need to set up other mysteries/problems/obstacles that need to be resolved during the course of the story, so the reader's curiosity is at least partially satisfied before the end.

Partial flashback

Starts in the same way as **Total flashback** with prologue, but the narrative rejoins the present of the Prologue before the end and then continues on until the resolution.

Alternating Flashback

Another method of using flashback is to have the two narratives – present and past – move along side by side in alternating sections throughout the story. Past sections can be told chronologically or may be given as random flashbacks as memories are triggered in the protagonist's mind in the present. As this can be confusing for the reader, keeping the present section chronological is recommended.

Advantages: Allows for flexibility as you can move backwards and forwards in time, and maximises the suspense potential of your material, allowing for build up of tension as what is revealed in the past sheds light on the present and vice versa – e.g. characters can hint in the present (either in their thoughts, censored memories or in dialogue with other characters) about events that happened in the past, while the past sections can set up mysteries that will not be resolved until later in the past or present narratives.

Disadvantages: This is a complex structure and requires constant revealing of smaller mysteries and setting up of new ones in order to keep the reader reading on. If not done skilfully, it can confuse the reader. Also, editing can become a problem as the writer's familiarity with the text can make it hard to remember what has been revealed when and what effect it will have on the reader. And changing anything may involve changing everything else. Feedback from other readers can be especially useful to a writer here. 'The House at Riverton' by Kate Morton is an example of this structure.

Unusual timelines

There are also novel with more unusual time structures - jumping around in time as in 'The Time Traveller's Wife' by Audrey Niffenegger, or starting at the end and going backwards like Sarah Water's 'The Night Watch', but these structures are hard to manage and should be chosen because they serve the plot, rather than just as a novelty or gimmick.